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Testimony before the Human Services Committee on the Governor's Budget Recommendations, S.B. 17

February 18, 2016

Good afternoon, my name is Jean Mills Aranha; I am an attorney at Connecticut Legal Services, Inc., a non-profit civil law firm dedicated to helping low-income people attain justice. I work in the Public Benefits and Elder Law Units. I am testifying today on behalf of our clients and the other very low-income, elderly and disabled residents of Connecticut, some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Opposition to Reduction in Funeral and Burial Allowance.

Sections 20 and 21 of this bill seek to reduce the amount the State will pay toward the funeral and burial expenses of an indigent person or recipient of public benefits to \$1,000. This funeral and burial allowance was last increased (to \$1,800) in 2006. Yet in the last ten years, the cost of a funeral has not gone down. In fact, it has increased by 28.6%¹.

In 2015, you reduced this allowance by about 22%, from the already insufficient amount of \$1,800 to \$1,400. This proposed cut to \$1,000 will reduce the original \$1,800 by about 44%. This is perhaps enough to pay for the most basic cremation, but no services, embalming, viewing or burial.

The elders I work with are very concerned about having a dignified funeral, in accordance with their cultural and religious values. They worry about the burden their funeral expenses may impose on their usually also low income family and friends. Most of them do everything they can to plan for these expenses. The statutes recognize this, for the state's potential contribution is already reduced by any of the individual's burial funds, prepaid funeral contracts and life insurance.

Only those who are so financially strapped that they have not been able to make any provision for their final expenses are taken care of by the State. It is ironic that the statute covering indigents requires that "the Commissioner of Social Services *shall give* to such person *a proper funeral and burial*," and then provides for a miserly amount, which the governor now proposes to reduce further.

¹ National Funeral Directors Association, <http://nfdia.org/about-funeral-service/trends-and-statistics.html>



This is a cruel way to balance the budget. Everyone deserves to be laid to rest with some dignity, even those without means. I urge you not to reduce this extremely modest allowance any further.

Opposition to Elimination of Legislative Review of Medicaid Waiver Application.

Section 32 of Governor's bill 17 proposes to repeal the review of Medicaid waiver applications by this Committee and the Appropriations Committee. Such a repeal would take away an essential protection for Medicaid recipients by removing the ability of the committees of cognizance to ensure that a waiver application by DSS is in the best interest of the public before it is submitted to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Committee oversight of the waiver application process is valuable, and the process by which it takes place has been carefully thought out and crafted. Without it, either the Administration will be able to set Medicaid policy without significant legislative input, or the details of each waiver proposal will have to be negotiated during the legislative session. This would result in delay in the budget process and less flexibility in the development of the waivers. The current structure is well-balanced and fair; it provides for oversight by the Committees with the most knowledge and allows for public input through comments and hearings.

The legislature wisely strengthened this protection just last year, by expanding its oversight to waiver renewals as well as initial applications, and by improving the public notice provisions. There is no reason to go backward and repeal this statute.

This Committee and the Appropriation Committee should maintain their oversight of Medicaid policy. I urge you to reject this proposal to eliminate it.

In the interest of time, I am addressing two issues in the Governor's Bill; my colleagues in the legal services community will be addressing others, and I endorse their testimony as well.

I appreciate the time of the Committee and the thoughtful attention you bring to these critical issues.
